Dioeciously Delicious: A Response to David Sorg

By James L. Murphy

In the Winter NYSAA newsletter, David Sorg quoted the 1656-57 Jesuit description of fruits found at Onondaga and suggested that the first 2 sentences in the following quotation describe the persimmon. Sorg and others suggest that the fruit described in the third sentence is the pawpaw.

> Stoneless Cherries are found there. Fruits grow there which are the color and size of an apri cot, whose blossom is like that of the white lily, and which smell and taste like the citron. There are apples as large as a goose's egg; the seed has been brought from the country of the Cats and looks like beans; the fruit is delicate and has a very sweet smell; the trunk is the height and thickness of our dwarf trees; it thrives in swamp spots and in good soil. (J.R. 43:256-259)

The first two sentences could refer to one or two plants. Although in the original French text, a comma follows "Stoneless cherries are found there," Thwaites replaced it with a period, doubtless realizing that three short declarative sentences were intended. Consider the actual description: "Stoneless cherries **are found there.** Fruits **grow there**… **There are** apples…" Further, size alone would seem to prohibit the "stoneless cherries" being the same fruits that are "the size of an apricot." I submit that that is pretty big for a cherry, stoneless or otherwise.

Briard (2005) presents a detailed account of the persimmon, including several French references predating the possible 1656-57 description in the Jesuit Relations, so at least some Frenchmen were aware of the persimmon by this date. Interestingly, in 1694 (nearly 40 years after the 1656-57 account) Father Claude Chauchetière, a Jesuit priest at Montreal sent a piece of persimmon bread to his brother in Limoges, France that he had received from the Illinois country some 500 leagues away (Briard 2005:74).

After last having tasted a persimmon on Thanksgiving 1959 and being unimpressed, I was prompted to gather and eat some this fall after seeing a draft of David's article. I found them a delicious fruit and in virtually all cases seedless or with very undeveloped seeds. I think it could indeed be compared to a very large, seedless Queen Anne-like cherry. But that does not mean I think the persimmon was cultivated at Onondaga any more than was the pawpaw.

David and I agree that the persimmon does not occur naturally in northern Ohio, northern Pennsylvania, or New York, a natural occurrence being defined as one not aided or abetted, deliberately or unintentionally by man. Nor do David Sorg and I disagree that the persimmon can be grown beyond its natural range. That disjunct occurrences have generally been proven to be relict later plantings by pioneers is in itself strong evidence that the plant did not exist in the area previously. The fact that such relict occurrences have survived for several hundred years also provides strong presumptive negative evidence that the cultivated plant did not exist in areas devoid of modern relict populations (Iroquoia).

I have dealt at length (Murphy 2001) with what I consider the unlikely proposition suggested by Keener and Kuhns (1997) that the Iroquois not only introduced the pawpaw to central New York but did so in droves sufficient to engender entire groves or "orchards" of this semi-tropical fruit. The thrust of my paper was that a combination of animal endozoochory and distribution by water (both methods undisputable) furnished sufficient means for extension of the range of *Asimina* into Ontario and western New York. I took the simple expedient of offering some pawpaws to a few captive deer. I made no claim that the success of this experiment proved anything other than that deer today will eat pawpaws. I averred (contra Wykoff 2009) that the question remained open but concluded that Iroquoian propagation and cultivation of *Asimina* was not necessary to explain the rare occurrence of this plant in Ontario and New York.

The problem with paradigms is that once they get established they tend to take over. Wykoff, who has been quick to dismiss the Keener and Kuhns vs. Murphy debate as unsophisticated could serve as a classic example of this intellectual trap. In an early paper Wykoff (1991) presents a reasonable case for the black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) being introduced to central New York by the Iroquois.

Although he acknowledged that each plant has a separate history and deserves extended treatment, even then he argued: "Black walnut, pawpaw, probably some hickories and oaks, several cultigens, weeds, and medicinal plants were quite likely introduced into New York before the arrival of Europeans" (Wykoff 1991: 16). More recently, Wykoff (2009) expands upon this paradigm by reiterating R. Neal Peterson's idea that the post-glacial range of the pawpaw was extended northward by now extinct giant herbivores, with ancient relict pawpaw stands being preserved by Paleo-Indians.

Unlike that of the black walnut, the distribution of the pawpaw in New York does not support the paradigm of Iroquoian "plant-hunting." David Sorg is simply furthering the spread of the "Iroquoian plant-hunter" paradigm by suggesting that because the persimmon can be grown beyond its natural range it probably was. Both he and Wykoff ignore an important and very basic tenant recognized by students of seed dispersion. As Cain, Milligan, and Strand (2000: 1219) observe, in studying seed dispersion and plant distribution it is definitely wrong to assume that a plant species reaches all areas of suitable habitat.

Conclusion

David Sorg asks for archaeologists to be particularly aware of the importance of any discovery of pawpaw or persimmon seed on New York prehistoric or Historic Indian sites and I could not agree more, although, as even Wykoff admits, the discovery of pawpaw seeds in archaeological context might indicate the use of the fruit but would not be proof of cultivation. Picking up pawpaws or persimmons is not the same as planting them. There is very little likelihood of finding persimmon seeds in archaeological context in a region where they are not known to have been indigenous and where if grown they very likely did not produce seeds.

Wykoff presents no real resolution to the Keener and Kuhns/Murphy debate. Even identifying the parent source of the rare pawpaw trees found in western New York is unlikely to demonstrate the precise mechanism(s) by which the trees reached Iroquoia. How much less capable will it prove in the case of the persimmon, which does not grow naturally in the region and, if it ever did, is unlikely to have left archaeological or paleontological remains?

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